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Progress report of the Secretary-General on ways to combat subregional and cross-border problems in West Africa

I. Introduction

1. West Africa presents a mixed picture. While several States in the subregion have resolutely embarked on the path to economic and democratic reforms, and although the intensity of conflicts has lessened, with fewer people killed in combat than in the previous year, the subregion remains acutely vulnerable. Some conflicts show little sign of abating, and child combatants and mercenaries are still used, small arms and light weapons continue to proliferate, impunity is prevalent for the perpetrators of human rights abuses, including abuses against women, youth unemployment is soaring, corruption is pervasive, rural exodus and demographic trends, in particular the explosive growth of the largest cities, undermine prospects for per capita growth, and HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases continue to spread in many countries.

2. The present report is intended to inform the Security Council of the progress made towards the implementation of the recommendations contained in its presidential statement of 25 March 2004 (S/PRST/2004/7), which was issued following consideration of my report of 12 March 2004 on ways to combat subregional and cross-border problems in West Africa (S/2004/200), as well as the implementation of the recommendations made by the Security Council mission to West Africa, 20 to 29 June 2004 (S/2004/525).

3. The present report outlines the steps taken or envisaged in response to calls by the Security Council to strengthen collaboration among the United Nations entities and their various partners to develop an integrated approach to conflict prevention in West Africa. It also provides an update on efforts by the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA) and the wider international community to address some of the key subregional cross-border issues raised in the above-mentioned reports, including:

(a) Collaboration among various partners working towards peace and security;

(b) Combating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, including recommendations on what further action the Security Council might take;

(c) Harmonizing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, with specific reference to programmes for women and children;

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(d) Finding durable solutions to the problems of refugees;

(e) Promoting reform of the security sector, including ways to address the phenomenon of roadblocks;

(f) Developing integrated strategies in sensitive border zones.

II. Efforts to develop an integrated and coordinated approach to conflict prevention

Collaboration by United Nations entities

4. In accordance with his mandate to enhance the contribution of the United Nations towards the achievement of peace and security in West Africa, my Special Representative for West Africa regularly liaises with other United Nations presences in the subregion to facilitate the exchange of information and analysis, devise strategies, promote joint planning and strengthen opportunities for a regional integrated approach on cross-border issues. To that end, the heads of the five United Nations peacekeeping and political missions in West Africa meet periodically, most recently in Monrovia in December 2004. Meetings of the Force Commanders from the three United Nations peacekeeping operations in the region, together with UNOWA, have been held with growing frequency to assess subregional threats to regional stability. An inter-mission secretariat, chaired on a rotating basis, has been established to coordinate the meetings and strengthen cooperation among the missions. My forthcoming report on inter-mission cooperation in West Africa will provide further detail on progress made in areas such as information-sharing, joint mission use of assets, including for joint border patrols, and logistics.

5. Major emphasis continues to be placed on addressing the negative humanitarian impact of conflicts ravaging several countries in the subregion. In this regard, the consolidated appeals process for West Africa, among others, serves as a useful instrument to harmonize the humanitarian calls for countries in crisis and also neighbouring States affected by those crises. In 2005, the consolidated appeals process focused primarily on trying to alleviate the deterioration of human security in West Africa, hence the ongoing close collaboration among the humanitarian, political and military actors.

6. Early in 2004, a regional protection initiative working group was established to focus on key humanitarian protection issues. This has now merged with the Subregional Humanitarian Coordination Group which meets once a month under the chairmanship of the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Data collection on various protection issues across the subregion has commenced, and a regional protection coordinator, seconded by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is in the process of being deployed to facilitate inter-agency protection activities.

Action by States in the Mano River basin

7. Encouraging prospects for the reactivation of the Mano River Union developed following the Summit of Heads of State held on 20 May 2004 in Conakry. The Summit, which also involved the President of Côte d'Ivoire, called on the security and intelligence services of the three member States to set up effective mechanisms

for consultation and control, notably on ways to deal with mercenaries. It is hoped that a follow-up summit will be held in the near future to determine practical ways of promoting confidence-building, peace and stability in the subregion. This development is in line with the Security Council's call on the Mano River States to resume dialogue.

8. Efforts are also under way, with United Nations support, towards the effective reactivation of the Mano River Union, to help enhance regular institutional cooperation among the three member States and between the subregion and international partners. A very welcome development was the decision taken by the International Contact Group for Liberia at its seventh working session, held on 17 September 2004, to expand its mandate and scope to include the other countries in the Mano River Union, as well as Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire, reflecting the commitment of the international community to address the regional dimensions of various national crises.

Joint action by the United Nations, the Economic Community of West African States and the European Union on cross-border issues

9. Further to the joint European Union-United Nations assessment mission to the secretariat of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in February 2004, and bearing in mind the Security Council's call on ECOWAS to work closely with the United Nations system and its partners to develop a regional conflict prevention policy, ECOWAS and UNOWA have concluded a cooperation agreement and a joint programme of work directed at preventing unconstitutional ways of seizing power; contributing to improving the capacity of ECOWAS in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict stabilization; devising a regional strategy for addressing the problem of youth unemployment as a factor of instability; and encouraging a regional approach to conflict prevention. UNOWA and ECOWAS will be working closely with the European Union (EU) in carrying out many of these joint activities. A working group with representatives from EU, ECOWAS and UNOWA has been established and charged with developing a plan of action to be submitted, for approval, to the next ministerial troika meeting in May 2005, and then for information to the Security Council.

10. Further to my 2004 recommendation, supported by the Security Council, on the need for Governments of the region to abide by their own commitments to free passage for people and goods and to take the necessary steps to reduce extortion at roadblocks, a collaborative effort involving ECOWAS, EU and UNOWA is scheduled to be launched in 2005. The purpose will be to promote the effective implementation of the 1979 ECOWAS protocol on the free movement of people and goods and also to address the problems of roadblocks and the extortion associated with them. This initiative is undertaken within the framework of the action plan developed by the ECOWAS secretariat with a view to facilitating the cross-border movements of people and goods through appropriate road transportation measures, which is carried out in collaboration with the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), the African Development Bank, the World Bank, EU and other development partners.

11. UNICEF has recently received funding from the Humanitarian Aid Office of the European Commission (ECHO) for a subregional child protection project. The project aims to reinforce the coordination of child protection initiatives in the

subregion by supporting systems for information-sharing among Governments, United Nations agencies and child protection agencies across borders focusing on the development of compatible databases across the subregion. Particular attention will be given to harmonizing approaches to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, sexual and gender-based violence, and children separated from their families. In addition, UNICEF will continue to provide technical and financial support to the ECOWAS Child Protection Unit to enhance its monitoring capacity for children affected by armed conflicts.

12. The Security Council, in its resolution 1539 (2004), expressed particular concern about the situation of children affected by armed conflict in several countries, including the West African States of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. In keeping with that resolution, all ECOWAS member States are now parties to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, following Liberia's ratification of the Convention in June 2004. Furthermore, child protection agencies, including civil society organizations, are currently supporting the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict in compiling its report on the implementation of Security Council resolution 1539 (2004).

Collaboration with and contribution of civil society organizations

13. In accordance with repeated calls by the Security Council for international organizations to collaborate more systematically with civil society actors in crisis management and conflict prevention, civil society organizations, particularly women's groups, have been increasingly invited by the United Nations entities operating in the subregion to participate in the elaboration and implementation of plans of action on the cross-border issues addressed in the present report. Many United Nations entities, including UNOWA, have established networks of civil society organization partners with whom they regularly collaborate. Further technical and financial assistance is needed to enable civil society organizations and local communities to implement projects and undertake advocacy work, especially in remote areas. The Human Rights and Protection Section of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) has, for instance, set up a unit devoted to the capacity-building of civil society organizations through training and logistical support and encouraging the formation of umbrella groups and networks.

14. Recognizing the crucial role of civil society in the promotion of peace and security, a civil society focal point, funded by the regional programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to strengthen Africa's regional capacities for peacebuilding, has been established in the ECOWAS secretariat. Through their efforts, civil society organizations have created the West Africa Civil Society Forum as an umbrella institution for regional integration, peace and security. The Forum has developed important initiatives to build capacity and coordinate civil society efforts and to monitor the conduct of elections, contribute to the implementation of peace agreements, and advocate for the adherence of ECOWAS member States to obligations under such initiatives as NEPAD and the ECOWAS protocols.

15. Many civil society organizations are contributing to the dissemination of information, and awareness-raising, at community and grassroots levels on the ECOWAS moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of small arms and light weapons in West Africa. In addition, the United Nations political and peacekeeping missions in the subregion, working in collaboration with local civil

society groups, regularly promote messages of peace to the affected communities. The Integrated Regional Information Network (IRIN) has devised a project for which funding is requested, to establish radio stations along the borders with the aim of producing programmes for travellers and residents along the Abidjan-Lagos transport corridor, with a special emphasis on AIDS awareness; IRIN Radio is currently operational in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia; on-the-spot training and co-production programmes with local, national and independent radio stations for broadcast, in particular, to sensitive border communities, are carried out.

16. In December 2004 in New York, the Global Compact office of the United Nations Secretariat convened a meeting to agree on ways in which the private sector, working in collaboration with other partners, could make a positive contribution to peace and stability in West Africa. A follow-up meeting is to be held in Dakar, early in 2005, in collaboration with UNOWA. The initiative aims, in particular, to identify and promote business practices that are sensitive to local communities, especially those affected by conflict.

III. Progress made to address specific cross-border issues, including further recommendations

Combating the proliferation of small arms and light weapons

17. The Security Council, in its presidential statement of 25 March 2004, emphasized the need to strengthen the capacity of ECOWAS to fight the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in West Africa. To that end, the Programme for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development has been replaced by the ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme, which is aimed at facilitating the process towards converting the ECOWAS moratorium into a legally binding instrument, building the capacity of national commissions and assisting them in developing national action plans. ECOWAS has also established a Small Arms Unit, which will provide leadership in the elaboration and implementation of ECOWAS policy on the control of small arms and light weapons, including the monitoring of the moratorium and its transformation into a convention.

18. In 2004, Benin, Cape Verde and Liberia ratified the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, of 2000. Other West African States which have ratified the Protocol include Burkina Faso and Mali. The UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery has initiated a project on control of small arms and light weapons in States of the Mano River Union and Côte d'Ivoire with a view to strengthening the harmonization of the work to fight the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the subregion, and reinforcing the capacity-building efforts of national commissions on with regard to small arms and light weapons.

19. In addition to the recommendations contained in my report of March 2004, the Security Council mission to West Africa in 2004 asked me to make recommendations on what further action the Security Council might take to help reduce the proliferation of small arms in the subregion. To that end, the Council may wish to welcome the establishment of the ECOWAS Small Arms Unit and to call on Member States to contribute generously towards its effective functioning. This will

strengthen ECOWAS authority in this field, and help translate into political action the renewed political will of West African States to bring the fight against small arms and light weapons to the forefront of their peace and security policies. The Council may also wish to encourage donors to provide adequate resources to support the work of the new ECOWAS Small Arms Control Programme. It should be recalled that the unfulfilled promises of the Programme for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development were partly a result of its lack of resources. The Council may further wish to consider endowing United Nations peacekeeping operations, especially those operating under Chapter VII, with the authority and resources to monitor and enforce arms embargoes. I welcome the recent adoption by the Security Council of resolution 1584 (2005) authorizing the peace operation in Côte d'Ivoire to monitor the effective implementation of the arms embargo imposed on that country under resolution 1572 (2004).

20. The effective control of the proliferation of small arms and light weapons also requires the strong collaboration of arms producers and suppliers. The Council may wish to call on other producers and suppliers to follow the example of the Wassenaar Arrangement, whose members have established formal cooperation arrangement with West African States, to respect the ECOWAS moratorium. Furthermore, as experience shows that marking and tracing of small arms and light weapons is an effective instrument for the regulation of their flows, the Council may also wish to recommend that all small arms and light weapons used in peacekeeping missions be marked and traced, as appropriate, by the United Nations, in collaboration with troop-contributing countries.

21. The Council may further wish to produce a "naming and shaming" list of individuals, corporations, groups and countries violating arms embargoes and the ECOWAS moratorium. Considering the close links between trafficking in small arms and light weapons and criminal activities, especially trafficking of natural resources such as diamonds and timber and human trafficking, including women and children, the Council may wish to assist in bringing those responsible for such crimes before the International Criminal Court for prosecution.

Harmonization of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, especially for child soldiers

22. In response to the proposal of the Security Council mission to West Africa in 2003 regarding the need for an integrated approach to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (see S/2003/688) and my own recommendation to that end, United Nations presences in West Africa have undertaken a major collaborative exercise on ways to harmonize disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes in the subregion and to eliminate inconsistencies among them. Such a regional strategy should help reduce the cross-border movement of combatants and weapons and ensure the consolidation of peace processes throughout the region.

23. To help develop the regional plan of action for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, workshops for United Nations peace missions in the subregion, United Nations agencies and development partners operating in West Africa were held in Dakar in May and August 2004. Participants acknowledged that while each disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process is shaped by specific local political, economic, social and geopolitical factors, there was a need for a harmonized approach and a shared understanding of disarmament, demobilization

and reintegration in the context of West Africa. The meetings targeted key areas in which cross-border collaboration and the harmonization of policies are deemed essential: child combatants, foreign combatants, female combatants, militia groups, the monetary component and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in countries not at war but deeply affected by armed conflict in their neighbourhood. A set of policy recommendations and practical guidelines were drafted on how to ensure a successful programme in West Africa. Following the workshops, national commissions on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration have established a network for the regular exchange of experiences. Consequently, the National Commission of Sierra Leone has visited Liberia. In preparation for disarmament, demobilization and reintegration in Côte d'Ivoire, the National Commission in that country has undertaken a lessons-learned mission to Guinea-Bissau and Liberia.

24. Among the principal findings of the regional workshops was that the reintegration phase is critical for the successful completion of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, and should be planned well ahead when devising such programmes in general. Particular attention should be paid to programmes for children as there was a great risk for ex-combatants who had previously benefited from disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes to be recruited again by fighting parties should the society relapse into violence. This is believed to have occurred on the Liberia-Côte d'Ivoire border during the surge in hostilities in Côte d'Ivoire in November 2004. In addition, there must be adequate resources available to sustain, in the long term, the follow-up reintegration programmes for former combatants, including women and children.

25. It was agreed, as a general principle, that money should not be handed to children as part of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme since such cash payments risk reinforcing the profit incentive, especially as commanders could recruit and send children into the process only to later collect from them payments they received. Cash payments for children also tend to reinforce the idea that children are being rewarded for their participation in hostilities while, in reality, the majority of children affected by armed conflict receive very little assistance. A distinct programme for former child combatants should strive to include, as much as possible from the outset, the participation of local communities in planning and managing the children's rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

26. A key objective of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration for foreign child combatants should be to repatriate them to their countries of origin. UNICEF and child protection agencies met in Dakar in June 2004 to devise a strategy for post-demobilization repatriation and reintegration of foreign child combatants. The scourge of foreign ex-combatants remains a largely ignored tragedy. Of the estimated 91,220 combatants recently demobilized in Liberia, 11,780 (12 per cent) were child soldiers, and 11,673 of them (99 per cent), have been reunited with their families, including 2,378 girls; about 30 of those demobilized child combatants have been repatriated from Liberia.

27. Special attention should be given to women combatants, whether they are fighters or "support staff" (cooks, "wives", load carriers etc.). Girls are particularly vulnerable to certain types of crimes such as rape, sexual exploitation or forced marriage, which often result in pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. Experts have defined appropriate standards on the treatment

of female combatants in cantonment and demobilization camps. The standard operating procedures on gender and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, currently being drafted by the United Nations Development Fund for Women, will be helpful in this regard. UNMIL is working closely with UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund to ensure that those groups of former combatants are fully considered in the Liberian disarmament, demobilization, rehabilitation and reintegration programme.

28. Securing reliable funding in support of the "Rs" (rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement etc.) is of the utmost importance to ensure adequate implementation of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes. UNICEF and child protection agencies continue to ensure that reintegration programmes focus on education, vocational and life-skills training and community-based social reintegration for children. The ECOWAS secretariat, in collaboration with UNDP and the Mano River Union, is implementing a programme focused on the reintegration of unemployed youth and the participation of youth in peace processes.

29. Indeed, socio-economic reintegration of ex-combatants largely depends on boosting economic growth and generating new jobs. Since poverty and unemployment are often among the root causes of many of the conflicts in the subregion, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes could be enhanced if accompanied by programmes that create employment and stimulate economic revival, thus giving to young people, including ex-combatants, new and expanded opportunities for legitimate work.

30. UNOWA, working in collaboration with the International Labour Organization, is currently engaged in a collaborative exercise with various United Nations entities, ECOWAS, civil society organizations, and the private sector to devise a regional strategy on ways to address youth unemployment as a source of instability in West Africa. As the Security Council mission to West Africa in 2004 noted, the need to create jobs and economic opportunity in West Africa is an essential element for lasting peace. Without progress in that domain, post-conflict countries could easily slip back into conflict, which could then spread to neighbouring States. Particular attention, therefore, needs to be given to devising projects which could prevent the spillover of conflict across State boundaries.

Finding durable solutions to the problems of refugees

31. In the light of the Security Council's concern about finding durable solutions to the problem of refugees and displaced persons in the subregion, ECOWAS and UNHCR have agreed on a series of joint activities focusing on four main themes, namely (a) addressing security issues in refugee camps; (b) prevention-mitigation preparedness and response; (c) reviewing ECOWAS treaties and protocols with a view to harmonizing refugee policies in West Africa; and (d) addressing refugee, returnee and development issues.

32. The Humanitarian Coordination Section of UNMIL organized a workshop on property rights of returnees, which emphasized the importance of using new legislation to protect widows' rights to property. This new legislation should help minimize property disputes that have the potential to threaten social peace and cohesion. The solutions under consideration should continue to take into account the situation of host communities to ensure that the precariousness of their living

conditions is not increased, especially with regard to the availability and management of land and the ecosystem in general, an issue which is often the subject of tensions and disputes in many areas of Guinea-Forestière where local communities have been hosting Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees for years. Development partners should do their utmost to halt the massive deforestation in such areas by helping local communities with concrete measures, including providing alternative sources of energy for firewood.

Security sector reform

33. The Security Council's call for the implementation of security sector reform as an essential element for regional peace and stability reflects the views of many West Africans themselves. Although the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) has been working towards a smooth transfer of primary responsibility for internal and external security to the armed and security forces of Sierra Leone, for many Sierra Leoneans the biggest security concern remains how those forces will perform once United Nations peacekeeping forces leave the country. In Guinea-Bissau, the armed and security forces currently appear to be among the major factors of instability. In Liberia, one of the key reasons for the relapse into violence after the end of the first civil war and the 1997 presidential elections was the lack of reform of the armed and security forces.

34. In addition, the subregion continues to be confronted by the phenomenon of violent military adventurism to seize power. Within the last 12 months, for instance, several West African countries have had coup attempts: Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania. Moreover, it has emerged that some members of the security and armed forces are associated with or otherwise involved in such illicit activities as smuggling of arms, drugs and natural resources, human trafficking, extortion at roadblocks and money-laundering.

35. The United Nations presences in West Africa, working closely with development partners, continue to support the efforts of ECOWAS member States to reform their security sector. To that end, an important meeting was convened in Dakar on 22 and 23 November 2004, with the participation of senior officers from the military and security forces of the subregion, as well as the Finance and Defence Ministries of concerned countries, United Nations agencies, international development partners, and West African civil society organizations. The meeting developed a common understanding of security sector reform in the West African context and reviewed concrete projects to reform the security sector in three major areas, namely, health, in particular HIV/AIDS, in West African armed and security forces; security forces and mismanagement in the administration of justice; and weaknesses in the fight against criminal activities.

36. ECOWAS, in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, is currently examining ways to improve its border control mechanisms by strengthening the flow of information among national law enforcement authorities, as well as regional networking and cooperation in law enforcement issues. In addition, ECOWAS and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime are working to develop a project under which computer-based training in investigation techniques would be made available to national law enforcement agencies. I am pleased to note that some development partners are increasingly interested in

security sector reform, especially the European Union, which has requested ECOWAS to submit projects that EU could help to finance in this area.

Developing integrated strategies in sensitive border zones

37. The Security Council mission to West Africa in 2004 highlighted, for priority attention, particularly sensitive areas, including the Guinean province of Guinea-Forestière, which borders Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, as well as provinces in Mali and Burkina Faso adjoining Côte d'Ivoire. Activities such as the recruitment of mercenaries and child soldiers, illegal trafficking of arms and drugs, banditry and road-block extortion are often concentrated along volatile border areas. Those areas are also prone to environmental degradation and tensions between host communities and newcomers. As a result, the mission recommended that the United Nations system should work on integrated strategies in cooperation with the Governments concerned in dealing with the broad range of problems afflicting these areas in order to try to prevent conflict from spreading further (S/2004/525, para. 58).

38. Many of the border problems require joint efforts by the countries and peoples concerned. Developing and encouraging integrated regional strategies for stabilizing border areas is one way of doing this. UNMIL has, for instance, conducted a mapping exercise of women's organizations involved in small income-generating businesses to support their networking. This exercise included a bazaar at which women traders from neighbouring West African countries shared ideas and strategies among themselves with a view, in particular, to strengthening trade links across borders. The private sector can also provide support to this endeavour through regional projects, investments and job creation opportunities, especially in border communities. Assistance from the wider international community, especially in strengthening the capacity of civil society groups working to promote a cross-border culture of peace, and in helping neighbouring Governments in West Africa to curb illicit cross-border activities, including arms and drug trafficking, would be particularly helpful.

39. A joint initiative, known as "Integrated strategies for sensitive border areas in West Africa", headed by UNOWA and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, including concerned United Nations country teams and peace missions, ECOWAS, development partners and civil society groups in the region, was launched in October 2004 to address problems of West African border areas. Draft integrated strategies for four particular clusters were developed in this regard: (a) Guinea/Côte d'Ivoire/Liberia/Sierra Leone; (b) Mali/Burkina Faso/Côte d'Ivoire/Ghana; (c) Mauritania/Mali/Niger; and (d) Senegal/Gambia/Guinea-Bissau. While each strategy is unique to the specific border area of concern, a number of overall common and recurrent elements and recommendations were identified in all four. Follow-up meetings in some of the actual border areas themselves are planned by UNOWA, with a wide variety of partners, in 2005.

IV. Observations

40. I am encouraged by the progress achieved in implementing some of the recommendations contained in the Security Council presidential statement of 25 March 2004. I am pleased to note the growth of a constructive partnership among the United Nations system, development partners and ECOWAS, as well as some of

the Governments, civil society organizations and local communities in the West African region. The development of truly collaborative arrangements for addressing cross-border problems, a process in which the first steps have now been taken, is an essential element in any integrated approach to conflict prevention in the subregion.

41. While some of the recommendations are being acted upon, progress on others appears limited or slow. There are many areas where redoubled and better targeted efforts could contribute more effectively to conflict prevention and peacebuilding in West Africa. Some of the more salient are listed in the following paragraphs.

42. It would be helpful if ECOWAS member States converted the moratorium on the importation, exportation and manufacture of small arms and light weapons into a legally binding instrument at the earliest opportunity. This would send a strong signal to development partners and the wider international community that West African Governments are themselves prepared to address decisively the devastating effects of the proliferation of small arms. Support should be given, both by ECOWAS, through its new Small Arms Unit and Small Arms Programme, and development partners, to the various national commissions on small arms and light weapons, and also for work to begin on establishing a regional register of small arms.

43. The implementation of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes in Sierra Leone and Liberia, with the support of UNAMSIL and UNMIL, in particular, has witnessed commendable progress. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration cannot be successful, however, without adequate funding for the reintegration and rehabilitation of ex-combatants to avert the risk of relapse into conflict. The recommendation of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (A/59/565) that a sizeable standing fund for peacebuilding be established that could be used to fund rehabilitation and reintegration programmes could prove especially beneficial to West Africa.

44. Measures to reduce the shocking levels of youth unemployment in West Africa are vital for rehabilitation, peacebuilding and development. The growing numbers of young men and women who lack prospects of ever being able to work for a decent living are a major threat to the future of this subregion. Rising youth unemployment, and the desperation that accompanies it, threatens to undermine any progress made in countries coming out of crisis. It also carries a real risk of destroying the political and social structures even of countries that are at present stable, especially when combined with demographic trends, such as the alarming growth of urban populations.

45. The humanitarian situation in many parts of the subregion remains a great concern. The consolidated appeals process 2005 for West Africa underlined the need to fund a regional humanitarian response strategy with project proposals that provide a broad range of cross-border support services. I urge development partners to fund some of those proposals, which could improve the security of people in dire need of protection or those whose coping capacities are close to exhaustion because of protracted hostilities. Special attention should be paid to sensitive border areas affected by conflict, whose populations are at risk from a variety of cross-border problems, including illicit trafficking of drugs and weapons, recruitment of child soldiers, environmental damage, banditry and widespread rape.

46. Security sector reform is an especially pressing priority for West Africa, and one which ECOWAS member States ought to address, with support from the international community, as a key tool for conflict prevention. A regionally integrated programme for reform of the security sector, which would include concrete projects that development partners could fund, should be produced by UNOWA, in consultation with its partners in West Africa, before the end of 2005.

47. While the international community has proved willing to lend its assistance, the primary responsibility for promoting peace in the region rests with West African leaders and communities themselves. I would like to encourage the ongoing efforts of ECOWAS and West African civil society in this regard, and I welcome the ever-growing collaboration with the United Nations. The United Nations will continue to support endeavours towards a better future for the people of West Africa. Harmonizing various initiatives, collaborating regionally and across State boundaries, thinking innovatively, and pulling assets together to avoid duplication and waste of resources, are all essential in this regard. My Special Representative for West Africa will continue to promote and facilitate this approach, in consultation with partners both in the region and outside.